

Comparing the effects of life skills training on male and female high school students' self-esteem in Sari

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Abstract

Psychologists believe that deep feelings of worthlessness or the lack of self-esteem are the source of many mental disorders. One way of preventing mental and behavioral problems is to promote individuals' psychological capacity through life skills training. The present study was conducted to evaluate the effect of life skills training on male and female high school students' self-esteem in Sari, Iran. The present study is applied in objectives and experimental in methodology and controlled, pretest-posttest and quasi-experimental in design and selected its samples using random assignment. The statistical population consisted of every female or male high school student in Sari. A sample of 580 students was then selected from the statistical population through simple random sampling, and 50 of the samples with a lower self-esteem according to their Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory results were then selected for the study. The research tools used included the Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory and a life skills training manual. Members of the case group received life skills training for two months and a half in 2-hour weekly sessions. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The results showed that life skills training (P -value=0.000) increased self-esteem in students of both genders. Moreover, life skills training had the same increasing effect on the students' self-esteem in both genders (P -value=0.122). The results showed that, not only does life skills training increase self-esteem in both male and female students, it also exerts a similar effect on both genders.

Keywords: Life Skills, Self-Esteem, Students

Introduction

Human life has evolved under the influence of broad industrial, social and cultural changes. A large number of people are unable to create a balance between the various external stimuli they are faced with and their internal forces of conflict and thus encounter problems in achieving human excellence –that is, a balanced and comprehensive development. Young children and adolescents are more vulnerable to internal and social damage due to their lack of experience and knowledge about inhibiting, facilitating and modification skills (Kaplan & Sadok, 2009; Macdonald, 2001). Students who do not possess the necessary skills for coping with stressful situations become prone to mental and emotional disorders, depression, anxiety and potentially drug use and anti-social behaviors (Dadsetan, 1997; Mensit & Mensit, 2007). With the increasing prevalence of mental disorders across the world and the global signification of the concept of mental health, the necessity of conducting extensive and diverse research on this health concept and the role it plays in humans' personal and social life become more apparent everyday (Mensit & Mensit, 2007; Kenerli, 2007). Training is the basis of primary prevention. Studies indicate that coping skills training promote mental health in young children and adolescents (Akbari & et al, 2006).

The three factors associated with alcohol consumption and drug use include a low self-esteem, the inability to express feelings and the lack of communication skills. Studies have also

shown a significant relationship between poor efficiency and smoking, alcohol consumption, drug use, high-risk behaviors and poor cognitive functioning (Abolghasemi & et al, 2002; Khosravi & Bigdeli, 2007).

Psychologists then believe that strong feelings of worthlessness and the lack of self-esteem are the source of many of the mental disorders developed in human beings (Amiri, 2005; Biabangard, 2002; Soleimani, 2005). Researchers believe that, self-esteem, which is one of the determinants of human behavior, is affected by human's relationship with others throughout the different stages of his life (Sahebi & Asghari, 2002; Behpajhoh, Ghobari & Foladi, 2009).

The inability to control ineffective social relationships, the inability to express feelings, the lack of self-esteem, the failure to communicate, the inability to control inefficient methods in decision-making, problem-solving, anger, stress and anxiety management and the lack of creative and critical thinking skills necessitate a deeper understanding of effective coping methods in the face of life crises and a change in learned behaviors, which can be achieved through life skills training. Given the importance of the issue, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed and proposed a program of Life Skills Training to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1993 as a way of promoting mental health and preventing psycho-social damage. Since then, this program has been tested and implemented in many countries (16). The UNICEF and the UNESCO recognize ten basic life skills, including:

Decision Making Skills: Sometimes wrong decisions entail unpleasant outcomes. This skill teaches what exactly decision-making is and how important it is (Akbari & et al, 2006).

Problem Solving Skills: Living demands a constant problem-solving. If important issues remain unresolved in life, psychological pressure ensues and threatens mental and physical health (Amiri, 2005; Biabangard, 2002).

Creative Thinking Skills: This skill teaches to think different and go beyond conventional experiences and create explanations or solutions that are self-specific (Sobhi gharamaleki, 2007).

Critical Thinking Skills: This skill entails the ability to analyze the available information objectively and according to personal experiences and to identify the influence of social values, peers and the mass media on personal behavior (Sobhi gharamaleki, 2007).

Effective Communication Skills: This skill signifies the expression of feelings, needs and personal views both verbally and non-verbally (Sobhi gharamaleki, 2007).

Interpersonal Relationship Skills: This skill involves positive daily interactions with others, especially with family members (Sobhi gharamaleki, 2007; Zerb, 2002).

Self-Awareness: This skill entails a capacity for self-introspection and for identifying one's wishes, needs and feelings. This skill also teaches what circumstances make one feel under pressure (Akbari & et al, 2006).

Empathy: This skill teaches how to understand the feelings of others under different circumstances, to accept individual differences and to improve interpersonal relationships with different people (Amiri, 2005).

Emotional Coping Skills: This skills involves recognizing emotions and being aware of their influence on behavior. Learning to manage intense and problematic emotions such as anger is also called emotional coping skills. This skill helps the individual show an appropriate reaction during times of inadequacy, anger, depression and anxiety (Amiri, 2005).

Stress Coping Skills: This skills teaches how to cope with the pressures and stresses of living in the modern world as well as other stresses (Amiri, 2005).

Researchers have confirmed the positive effects of life skills training in reducing drug abuse, promoting the use of intelligence and cognitive capacities, preventing violent behaviors, promoting self-reliance and self-confidence, etc. (Zerb, 2002). The results of studies on life skills training in

middle schools and high schools showed reductions in the rate of smoking, alcohol consumption and drug abuse as well as increased negative attitudes toward drug abuse and increased self-esteem in social settings (Amiri & et al, 2005). The results of the many studies conducted on the effect of life skills training programs on the different aspects of mental health show that teaching these skills improves self-esteem, social skills and interpersonal relationships, positive social behaviors and social adjustment, family satisfaction and adjustment to the family, personal and interpersonal problem-solving skills and coping skills (Fathi Ashtiani & Emamgholivand, 2002). According to studies, adolescence is the most crucial age for preventive training. Given the valuable role of life skills training in the development and improvement of self-esteem, especially among adolescents, and due to the positive effects of preventive programs implemented in schools, the present study was conducted to examine the effect of life skills training on self-esteem in male and female high school students and to then compare the degree of this effect between the two genders.

Methodology

The present study is experimental in methodology, controlled, pretest-posttest and quasi-experimental in design and uses random assignment as its method of sampling. Two high schools (an all-girl school and another all-boy school) were selected from the high schools of Sari. The Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory was used to collect the students' data and measure their self-esteem. The level of self-esteem in the entire population of students from the two high schools (n=580) was thus evaluated using this inventory. The Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory has 30 two-choice questions and each question is given a score of 0 or 1. At the beginning of the session, the Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory was distributed among the students in both the experimental and control groups in the form of a pretest; after the experimental group completed its training course on life skills, the same test was distributed among both groups again as a posttest. The mean score obtained in the Eysenck Self-Esteem Inventory is 15; that is, if the subject's score is lower than 15, his self-esteem is lower, and if it is higher than 15, his self-esteem is then evidently higher. The validity of this test has been confirmed in numerous studies (Cooper Smith, 1967 and Campbell, 1956, as cited in Falsafinejad, 1993). Moreover, Pourshafe'i (1992) reported a validity coefficient of 0.83 for the inventory through the split-half method and Falsafinejad (1993) and Golbargi (1994) reported a validity coefficient of 0.80 for it through the test-retest method. To determine its content validity, the inventory was distributed among ten psychology professors who confirmed that the inventory can properly measure self-esteem. A study conducted by Akbari (1992) showed a correlation coefficient of 0.65 between Coopersmith's and Alice Pope's self-esteem tests. A total of 50 students with a lower self-esteem, comprising of 25 girls and 25 boys, were selected for the study. Training was carried out through workshops over a period of two and a half months and in weekly 2-hour sessions using standard training materials consisting of 10 booklets with titles including "decision-making", "problem-solving", "self-awareness", "creative thinking", "critical thinking", "effective communication skills", "empathy", "creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships", "stress coping skills" and "emotional coping skills". The workshops had both a theoretical and a practical content and training was carried out by a consultant. Descriptive statistics including the calculation of the mean, standard deviation and frequency and percentage tables, and Inferential statistics including the independent t-test were used to analyze the data in SPSS.

Results and Discussion

The study population consisted of 50 high school students (25 female and 25 male) with a mean age of 15-17 who had a low self-esteem according to the results of the inventory they filled out. The first hypothesis of this study was that life skills training can effectively increase female students' self-esteem. The t-test was used to determine the significance of this relationship. The P-

value was calculated as 0.000 for self-esteem at the confidence level of 95% ($PV < 0.000$) and as smaller than $\alpha = 0.05$ for mental health at the confidence level of 95%; a significant relationship was therefore observed between life skills training and the female students' increased self-esteem. Life skills training thus increases female students' self-esteem. The second hypothesis of the study was that life skills training can increase male students' self-esteem. The t-test was also used to determine the significance of this relationship. The P-value was calculated as 0.000 for self-esteem at the confidence level of 95% ($PV < 0.000$) and as smaller than $\alpha = 0.05$ for mental health at the confidence level of 95%; a significant relationship was therefore observed between life skills training and the male students' increased self-esteem. Life skills training thus increases male students' self-esteem.

As shown, life skills training can increase both male and female students' self-esteem. The difference in the effect of life skills training on self-esteem was compared between the male and the female students. The independent t-test was used for examining the significance of this relationship. Since the calculated t (P-value=0.122 and $t=1.573$) has a greater P-value of $\alpha = 0.05$ at the confidence level of 95%, the difference is not significant and life skills training can be said to equally increase self-esteem in male and female students.

Hypothesis 1: Life skills training is effective on increasing female students' self-esteem.

Table 1: The statistical indicators of the female students' self-esteem before and after life skills training

	Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total	Before Training	50	14.81	1.19	12	17.5
	After Training	50	17.3	1.43	14	20
Female Students	Before Training	25	14.24	1.16	12	16
	After Training	25	16.48	1.13	14	18

Table 1 presents the statistical indicators and the minimum and maximum score of self-esteem before and after life skills training and shows that this training increases self-esteem in all the subjects, including the female students.

Hypothesis 2: Life skills training is effective on increasing male students' self-esteem.

Table 2: The statistical indicators of the male students' self-esteem before and after life skills training

	Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total	Before Training	50	14.81	1.19	12	17.5
	After Training	50	17.3	1.43	14	20
Male Students	Before Training	25	15.38	0.92	14	17.5
	After Training	25	18.12	1.23	16	20

Table 2 presents the statistical indicators and the minimum and maximum of the scores of self-esteem before and after life skills training and shows that this training increases self-esteem in all the subjects, including the male students.

Hypothesis 3: The increasing effect of life skills training on self-esteem is higher in female than in male students.

To determine the difference in the effect of life skills training on the students' self-esteem by gender, the female and male students were compared in terms of the differences between their self-esteem scores before and after training using the independent t-test.

Table 3: The statistical indicators of the female and male students' scores of self-esteem before and after training

Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Female Students	25	2.24	0.82	1	4
Male Students	25	2.74	1.36	0	5

Table 3 presents statistical indicators, including the mean, minimum and maximum score of self-esteem before and after life skills training, and shows that the mean scores of self-esteem obtained by the female and male students are not significantly different. The independent t-test was used to determine the significance of this difference.

Table 4: The independent t-test used for examining the difference between the scores of self-esteem obtained by the female and male students before and after training

Group	Df	T	P-Value
Female and Male Students	48	1.573	0.122

Since the calculated t (P-value=0.122 and t=1.573) has a greater P-value of $\alpha=0.05$ at the confidence level of 95%, the difference is not significant and life skills training can be said to equally increase self-esteem in male and female students.

Conclusion

The overall objective of the present study was to evaluate the effect of life skills training on self-esteem in male and female high school students in Sari. The degree of self-esteem was evaluated in students from both genders. As shown in table 1, the mean score of self-esteem was 14.24 before training and 16.48 after training in the girls, which suggests an increase in self-esteem through training. Table 2 also shows that the mean score of self-esteem was 15.38 before training and 18.12 after training in the boys, which suggests a significant increase in self-esteem through training. The results of testing the hypotheses of the study showed that life skills training is effective in increasing self-esteem in students of both genders. According to the scores obtained before and after training, a significant relationship was found between life skills training and the students' self-esteem in both genders. The statistical findings of the study also confirmed this result and showed that life skills training increases self-esteem in both female and male students.

Botvin et al. found that adolescents who were unfamiliar with life skills and coping skills suffered from a low self-esteem; the lack of coping skills in life creates vulnerability toward the pressures of everyday life (Fathi Ashtiani & Emamgholivand, 2002). These skills enrich the internal control core and thus teach individuals that they can affect their environment and make a change (Kazemian Moghaddam & et al, 2008).

Botvin and Norton (1988) examined the validity of life skills training in normal populations and found that self-management skills, including decision-making and problem-solving skills, awareness about social influence and resistance against it and social skills increase social competence in students. According to theorists, life skills are trained to people in an effort to increase their mental and social abilities and to enable their effective coping with the demands and struggles of life (Kazemian Moghaddam & et al, 2008; Sodani, 2008; Karimi Baghmalek & Ebadi, 2006). Promoting social cognitive skills, life skills and coping skills in adolescents has the effect of moderating behaviors, increasing flexibility, reducing high-risk behaviors, preventing from problematic behaviors and promoting positive behaviors such as healthy relationships with peers and adjustment to the home environment, the school and the community (Heravi & et al, 2004). In general, life skills training is a powerful tool that helps cope with social, economic, emotional and psychological pressures as it engages adolescents and other age or gender groups in the precise

manner of thinking rather than in the subject of thinking (Abolghasemi & et al, 2002). In line with this study, Esmaeili (2001) also investigated the effect of life skills training and parenting style on self-esteem in students in Ardabil province and showed that the mean score of self-esteem was higher in the students who had passed a life skills training course than those who had not. This finding is consistent with the results of studies conducted by “the American Psychological Association” (1994 and 1996) in that life skills training helps increase students’ self-esteem (Mosavi, Haghshena, Alishahi & Najmi, 2008).

According to Taremian (1999), life skills training improves physical and mental health through increasing self-esteem, promoting the capacity for coping with environmental and psychological pressures, reducing anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, reducing the rate of academic failure, strengthening interpersonal relationships and healthy social behaviors, reducing drug abuse and preventing mental, behavioral and social problems (Kenerli, 2007). A mental health promotion program focusing on the development of life skills carried out on a group of children aged 5-15 residing in Ontario, Canada, helped develop and improve academic performance and self-esteem and overcome anti-social behaviors (Beh pajhoh, Ghobari, Foladi, 2009). The present study also examined the difference between the genders in the level of increase in their self-esteem caused by life skills training. As shown in table 4, the P-value (0.122) obtained for self-esteem after life skills training does not show a significant difference between the genders. The comparison of the results obtained for the tests show no differences between the genders in the degree of increase in their self-esteem. Life skills training is thus equally effective on self-esteem in male and female students. Studies have shown that everyday problems exert a lower pressure on individuals with a high self-esteem and those who have a good system of support (Cooper, 2003). Mansour Bagheri and Dr. Hadi Bahrami Ehsan (2001) examined the role of life skills training in students’ knowledge about drug abuse and their attitude toward it as well as their self-esteem and found that life skills training changed all the three qualities. Teaching essential life skills seems to activate the sense of internal control in the individual and strengthen his self-efficacy and self-esteem. Teaching these skills leads to an increase in self-esteem and a reduction in the negative effects exerted by everyday sources of stress and can thus help promote mental health (Holon & Beck, 1994). Given the important role of schools in ensuring students’ mental health, life skills training programs can be effective in helping students develop a healthy personality and achieve mental health (Sargolzaei, 2003; Roger, 1999). Life skills training is an effort in the light of which adolescents are encouraged to use their creativity and make spontaneous efforts for finding effective ways for resolving their life conflicts (Sargolzaei, 2003). Counsellors and professionals who have more knowledge about the essential life skills required for dealing with everyday problems and for succeeding in forming positive social interactions can help adolescents and young adults solve their problems and lead more successful lives in a healthier social environment (Roger, 1999; Simos, 2005). The present study did not address factors such as the students’ GPA and their parents’ level of education; however, more accurate results can be achieved if these factors and the effect they have on the target variable are examined too. In addition to the general limitations of conducting experimental studies, the implementation of the training, including teacher selection and teacher training, and the nature of the school authorities’ cooperation for training were among the limitations of the present study. Given the findings of the study on the effect of communication skills training on self-esteem, education authorities are recommended to also teach communication skills to school students in an effort to improve their self-esteem and social skills. Universities, institutions of higher education, the ministry of education and counseling and psychotherapy centers are recommended to focus more on communication skills training due to the greater prevalence of severe behavioral and emotional disturbances and social isolation and in order to prevent behavioral disorders and are also

encouraged to hold training workshops on life skills in order to further help develop a healthy personality in adolescents.

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